



IDEA OF QUEST IN THE EARLY POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

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BY
MS. SAMI RAFIQ

Under the Supervision of
Prof. K. S. Misra

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P R E F A C E

Yeats's later poetry has by and large drawn greater critical attention than his earlier poetry. Even though the earlier poems have been considered, they have not been given adequate individual attention. The result is that Yeats's early poetry has been superficially acknowledged as romantic and escapist. But the truth is that the early poems have solidity of content and are quite often philosophic. Yeats demonstrates here his assimilation of various influences — native as well as esoteric — which shaped his imagination, and lent seriousness to his composition. Though the majority of the early poems show Yeats's experimental nature in poetic composition, there is ample evidence of growing maturity in his use of a variety of techniques. His experimentation was not confined to diction and imagery only, but is discernible in his treatment of personal experiences which, in a subtle manner, fuse with ideas of wider application and relevance. Amongst these ideas the one dealing with quest is quite significant, but unfortunately has not been paid adequate critical attention to. The present study aims at an analysis of selected poems from Yeats's early collections to determine the nature and significance of the themes of quest. Quite

often such themes are not always clearly stated, but, as we have tried to establish, can be discerned through an in-depth study of the poems to show how they contribute to the total meaning of a particular piece.

The study is divided into five chapters. The first chapter -- Introduction -- deals with the biographical and formative influences which are crucial to the study of Yeats's early poetry. The following three chapters contain the analysis of some of the selected poems of W.B. Yeats. The final chapter sums up the ideas that the analysis of the poems has yielded. A Select Bibliography has been given at the end.

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Sami Rafiq

(SAMI RAFIQ)

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CHAPTER I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Yeats was born on 13 June 1865 at Sligo. His early childhood was spent in the midst of the rich and plentiful flora and fauna of the county of Sligo. Yeats's own quiet and shy temperament seem to correspond to the peaceful, kind and generous surroundings where nature was endowed with all the tenderness and soothing pleasures of an uncontaminated existence.

During 1868 the Yeatses shifted to London and remained there for seven years. Although many more such trips were made to London, the Yeatses never lost touch with Sligo. The children thought Sligo their home, rather than London. The holidays in Sligo were filled with boating, fishing and exploring the lush green woods. Yeats would explore the hills of Howth with a green net slung across his shoulder. He had a Wordsworthian interest in the luxuriant manifestations of nature and very often took pleasure in discovering flowers and insects and could spend a whole day in the hill paths and glades without the glimpse of a human face. It was here that his soul was fashioned. "There peasant and squire alike live in an old world, rich in folk-lore and folk song. The boy's imagination entered

fairy land, and he was bewitched for life into a longing for magic. From the very soil of ancient Eire he drank the dream of the noble and the beggarman and forever after the modern world seemed to him vulgar, and not real in any essential way."¹ He owed to these wanderings in Sligo and Howth also natural glimpses that find expression in The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems.

These close contacts with nature had a formative influence on young Yeats's mind. Nature was full of adventure and mystery for Yeats and it supplied the images and symbols of his earliest poems. As to Wordsworth Nature was a teacher and companion, to him also she brought comforting effects, without ever appearing "red in tooth and claw." Nature to him was the threshold of primitive folk-lore and the strong hold of fairies and supernatural beings. To be drawn out from the rich, imaginative and even wild world of nature and to be put under the restricting and rigorous discipline of school life, must have proved to be a shock and an unnatural change to Yeats's gentle and impressionable mind. His love for the world of nature and the world of fairies menaced by the pull of the reality of every-day existence must have made him very

1. A.S. Collins, English Literature of the Twentieth Century (London, University Tutorial Press, 1962), p.14.

unhappy indeed.²

His formal education began under his aunts who, because of his engrossment in his own thoughts, had supposed that he was lacking in intelligence. But the truth was that he was not deficient in intelligence which his aunts had observed in him, because of his withdrawal from the world of reality. Infact, his mind had an obsessive preoccupation with the world of fantasy and dream which, of necessity, required of him to be a recluse and a lover of solitude. This dream world was connected with the folk-lore with which the woods and glens were associated. It was on account of his preoccupation with dreams that Yeats did not have a pleasant experience of his school life. His gentle disposition as a dreamer did not find a congenial environment in school. In Sligo he went to Dame School where he felt that he did not have much to gain.

Later on, when the family moved to London, Yeats was admitted to a day school, Godolphin Hammersmith. His experience in this school was more disappointing than the one in Sligo. At Sligo at least he had the satisfaction of being in contact with nature, Yeats, being gentle in disposition, had to endure a lot of harassment from the inmates

2. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London, Macmillan, 1961), pp.5-6.

of Godolphin Hammersmith, to escape which he finally befriended one of the finest athletes of the school, Cyril Vesey. Besides being his friend and protector, Cyril Vesey also shared Yeats's love for the living world of nature, the woods, the insects, etc. Perhaps the interests that the two pursued compensated in some way for the constricting and suffocating effect the school discipline had on Yeats's young mind.

In 1881 Yeats joined the High School at Harcourt Street. Here unlike the Godolphin there was no harassment and Yeats could at last have the time and leisure he had wanted. Up to this time we find that Yeats's only obsession was with Entomology and he was not particularly bright in literature. He finished school in 1883 and regretted that his father had sent him there. He attributed his being poor in literature (Greek and Latin) to his not having much time for it. He believed that, had his father kept him at home and tutored him in Greek and Latin, he would not have to approach the classics through poor translations. His father, in pursuance of his belief that a little training in Art is a must for every young man, put Yeats to attend classes at the Metropolitan School of Art in Kildare Street (London). But this, too, proved to be a dissatisfying experience for Yeats, for he realized that his real interest

was not in Art but in the classics and poetry.

The dreamy atmosphere of Yeats's early poems and the passionate intensity of the later poems owe much to the influences of his early life. Among his earliest influences the most significant one was that of his grandfather, William Pollexfen. During his childhood the poet stayed for some time with him. Pollexfen was a rich man and lived in a large house, called "Merville".³ Yeats's response to his grandfather was that of adoration mixed with awe. He looked up to him as a god and always nourished in his mind, paradoxically, a feeling of distance as well as nearness. At a later stage in his life Yeats has recalled his grandfather's image like this : "He had a violent temper and kept a hatchet at his bedside for burglars and would knock a man down instead of going to the law."⁴

Yeats's delight in passionate men manifested in his poems and plays must have had its origin in the memory of his grandfather. The domineering personality of William Pollexfen and his extraordinary reticence combined with the intensity of living naturally affected the young Yeats's mind.

3. There were sixty acres of land round "Merville". The house contained fourteen bedrooms, a stone kitchen, offices, a glorious laundry redolent of soap, and a storeroom like a village shop with windows and fire places, shelves and a strong smell of ground coffee.

4. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 7.

But while his grandfather's influence on his mind was primarily emotional, his father John Yeats's influence on his mind was intellectual and progressive. Yeats inherited his attitudes towards personality largely from his father.

Both father and son believed that personality was not merely the individual's complex of distinct external characteristics and mannerisms but a mass of instincts, appetites, longings and intuitions, resting on the firm basis of the five senses.

Like his father, Yeats believed that emotion and intellect had a creative purpose rather than a dead appendage to man. Servile devotion to an abstract intellectual principle would destroy the human soul just as effectively as servile religious adherence destroys the mind. Yeats abided by his father's principles that the artist must be encouraged to change his intellectual convictions from day to day, so long as he maintains the integrity of the soul. The integrity of the soul for Yeats meant probably an unswerving devotion towards Irish nationalism. Yeats's poetic mission was actually two-fold in the way of freeing the soul from the fetters religious dogma and cultivating the imagination to let it cross the boundaries of restrictive abstract intellectual principles. This is perhaps one of the reasons for which modern critics have called him "The Last Romantic."

As his art matured Yeats became more and more convinced that art is the concrete expression of personal experience and that one of the smaller objectives of poetry is the beauty of speech. "As late as 1899 Yeats still believed that the true course was to 'liberate the arts from their age and from life'."⁵ Poetry began to be not just a criticism or confirmation of life but it became a revelation of a hidden life. Yeats's father also introduced him to imaginative literature (during his school days) by reading aloud to him Scott and Macaulay; "The Lay of the Last Minstrel" gave him his first wish to be a magician. He also absorbed Balzac, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Byron, the Pre-Raphaelites, Darwin, Wallace, Huxley and Haeckel. His father had a collection of literary works in his personal library from which he also introduced him to history and geology, subjects that became a passion with Yeats during his early youth. "Yeats complained that as a young boy he had been deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom he detested, of the simple minded religion of his childhood. This had driven him to make a new religion out of old Irish myth and poetry."⁶ Professor Jeffares has remarked that "In addition to drawing on the richness and strangeness of the saga material and

5. A.S. Collins, English Literature of the Twentieth Century p. 17.

6. Ibid, p. 14.

making it part of his personal poetic language and mythology Yeats was carrying out his ambition of writing... poetry redolent... (of) the places he knew in Ireland — Innisfree, Lissadell, Dromohair, Scanavin and Lugnagall ..." ⁷

This search had begun with Yeats's earliest compositions which were romantic pieces and a co-mingling of Shelley and Edmund Spenser.

John Yeats even tried to mould his son's personality according to artistic principles. The following is an account of what Yeats would learn in his father's studio :

Many of the finer qualities of Willie Yeats's mind were formed in the studio of St. Stephen's Green, in long talks on art and life, on man and God, with his sensitive and enthusiastic father... the artist stepping forward along a strip of carpet to touch his work with tentative brush, then stepping back again always in movement, always meditating high themes, and now and then breaking into talk on the second part of "Faust" or the Hesperian apples, or the relation of Villany to genius. ⁸

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7. A. Norman Jeffares, "The Poetry of W.B. Yeats" in David Daiches, ed, Studies in English Literature, No.4 (London, Edward Arnold Ltd., 1961), pp.11-12.
 8. D.N. Dunlop, "Interview with Mr. W.B. Yeats" in E.H. Mikhail, ed., Interviews and Recollections (London, Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 9.

Other influences during Yeats's early life were relatively minor as compared to those of his father and grandfather. These influences were related to a multitude of Sligo relatives and Pollexfen and Middleton cousins. Among his Sligo relatives was a Middleton cousin, Henry Middleton, who inspired the character of John Sherman in a novelette by the same name published early in Yeat's career. Henry Middleton become a noted eccentric later on, but Yeats's relations with him never faded out. A major and lasting influence during Yeats's early youth was that of George Russell, known as A.E. Yeats met him while he was in the Art School in London. A.E. was a poet and mystic, besides being an artist. He sketched his religious inspirations instead of imitating the models. Yeats and Russell wrote in rivalry and as a result contributed richly to each others' literary genius. It is well to remember that A.E. was a close collaborator with him in the establishment and growth of the Abbey Theatre. It was during this early phase of his career that he also came in contact with Walter Pater and Mohini Chaterji, influences from the west and the east respectively. Their philosophies were strong influences which lasted throughout his life. But somehow the two opposing ideologies mitigated in Yeats's personality : Pater accepted the dream world as real while Mohini Chatterji's

Samkaric abstraction rejected the objective reality as merely a dream world.

Throughout his literary career Yeats also came under the influence of different women who helped him greatly in his chosen field. During the early phase of his literary career and the publication of his early poems Yeats came across Father Matthew Russel, editor of the Irish Monthly, who used to be surrounded by a crowd of upcoming poets among whom was Katharine Tynan, the talented, red haired daughter of an Irish farmer. She and Yeats found much in common between each other, such as their love of books, poetry and admiration of the old Fenian. With Katharine Tynan it was an abiding friendship which lasted throughout their lives. In Yeats's letters to Katharine Tynan, critics have identified important clues to the mystery of his personality and his complex poetic works.

It was in 1899 that he met Maud Gonne. He was bewitched not only by her physical beauty but by the beauty of her mind as well. He has reminisced about their first meeting in his Autobiographies. Its description in the Autobiographies has found brilliant and nostalgic retrospection in many of his early poems : "Her complexion 'was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the

light falls and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window'."⁹ In her he found a strong hold of ideas which were latent within himself, especially those of Irish Nationalism and his keen interest in the Occult. She and Yeats were seeking different things — "she, some, memorable action for final conservation of her youth and he, after all, but to discover and communicate a state of being."¹⁰

The other feminine influence on Yeats was that of Olivia Shakespear whom he met in 1894. She was the young wife of an elderly solicitor. "Of his close friends the one least publicly celebrated in his poetry and in his autobiographical prose, yet the woman perhaps the most intimately known, she was one of the few persons with whom he could be completely relaxed."¹¹ This relatively unknown confidante of Yeats must have allowed him opportunities to express his private thoughts and experiences, thus helping the poetic genius of Yeats to have a full growth. She was a generous woman, full of human warmth, who helped Yeats to complete his personality through affection, sympathy

9. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies, p. 123.

10. Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939
(London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1942), p. 138.

11. John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats
(London, Thames and Hudson, 1959), p. 13.

and comradeship. In his early letters to her, critics have traced the early development of his doctrine of self and anti-self which was later expounded in Per Amica Silentia Lunae.

In the early 1890s Yeats was aiming at the resurgence of Irish culture for those who were lettered and knew nothing about Irish culture. The ultimate aim was a unity of culture. It was in pursuit of this aim that Yeats first visited Lissadell in 1894¹² the impressions of which are narrated in a letter¹³ to his sister. This is how one of the Gore Booth sisters, Eva Gore Booth, was brought into the Irish literary movement. Yeats had discovered some literary talent in her and had become her mentor.

A few years before the publication of The Wind Among the Reeds Yeats had a romantic escapade with a married woman, refined in mind and looks. He gave her the imaginary name of Diana Vernon and some of the romantic love poems in The Wind Among the Reeds, such as "The Shadowy Horses" and "The Binding of the Hair" are addressed to her. The passionate beauty and intensity of this collection of poems owes

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12. Lissadell was the Georgian house set among woods of Sir Henry Gore Booth, a protestant landlord.
13. Allan Wade, ed., The Letters of W.B. Yeats (London, Rupert Hart Davis, 1954), pp. 239-40.

a lot to Yeats's romantic involvement with her.

Soon after the installation of Woburn Buildings Yeats brought Arthur Symons on a trip to Ireland, where both Yeats and Symons came in contact with Lady Gregory and remained great friends, collaborators and co-managers of affairs ever since. After Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory's influence was the only ultimate and lasting feminine influence on Yeats's political and literary career. In the years that followed the above interactions, Yeats came to Coole time and again, and not only relaxed in its serene beauty, but also captivated its beauty in many of his poems. Lady Gregory's house was set among the great woods, with a lake at the edge. Coole took its name from the lake.¹⁴

Yeats's earliest compositions in poetry are a co-mingling of influences from the Romantic poets. There were also slight dramatic sketches, such as "The Island of Statues," "The Seeker," "Mosada," "Time" and "The Witch Vivien," which were published in the Dublin University Review which was under the editorship of Rolleston and Oldham -- both on the look out for literary talents. Oldham took a deep interest in Yeats. These early works were merely

14. For a detailed description of the beauty of Coole see Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, p.65.

pastoral or dream sequences. Oldham encouraged Yeats by asking him to read his poetry in his room where friends used to assemble. "Whatever Yeats's achievement at that time there seems to have been little doubt in the literary circles that he was the coming man."¹⁵

In 1887 Yeats was working at the British Museum on an edition of Irish fairy and folk tales. He genuinely believed in the existence of all the supernatural beings. He believed also that these beings were within the reach of humanity on a primitive plane -- civilized humanity could neither see nor comprehend these supernatural beings. Yeats himself has said in his essay "The Celtic Element in Literature" that "Once every people in the world believed that trees were divine, and could take a human or grotesque shape and dance among shadows... They saw in the rainbow the still bent bow of a god thrown down in his negligence; they heard in the thunder the sound of his beaten water jar, or the tumult of his chariot wheels...."¹⁶

His interest in folklore shows that he was in search of something beyond the established realm of poetic reality.

15. V.K. Narayan Menon, The Development of W.B. Yeats (Oliver and Boyd, 1942), p. 7.

16. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions (London, Macmillan Press, 1961), p. 174.

His was a concrete purpose, to build up a new poetic tradition. "His search for some philosophical idea, some tradition of belief older than the church, took him wherever his fancy led. Eastern philosophy and religion had a vague and distant lure. He was attempting to create a new religion, one of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first emotion."¹⁷ Yeats believed that those imaginary beings were created out of the deepest instinct of man to be his measure and his norm. For Yeats they became a medium to express what was nearest to the truth.

It is clear that he had discovered an untouched domain of ideas for his poetry, but what gave form to his poetry was the influence of the Symbolist Movement. It was through Symons (the first man with whom Yeats formed a real and lasting intimacy) that Yeats came in contact with the symbolist movement. The symbolist movement called for a new technique of expression, and a new style. Yeats's own theories of symbolism were derived almost wholly from those of Symons. The following extract from Yeats is pertinent to quote in this regard:

Form was to be elaborated, not for its own sake, but to separate it from its servility

17. V.K. Narayan Menon, The Development of W.B. Yeats, p.12 .

to rhetoric. All sounds, all colours, all forms either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet it is one emotion.¹⁸

Yeats was not involved in the movement as such but turned to it to enrich his own poetry with a new aesthetic. Edmund Wilson has perceptively observed in this regard as follows:

I do not ordinarily think of Yeats as primarily a symbolist poet, it is because, in taking Symbolism to Ireland, he fed it with new resources and gave it a special accent which leads us to think his poetry from the point of view of its national qualities rather from the point of view of its relation to the rest of European literature.¹⁹

Another major literary influence on Yeats's poetic career was Ezra Pound. In this respect Douglas Goldring's

18. W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 156-57.

19. James Hall and Martin Steinmann eds., The Permanence of Yeats Selected Criticism (New York, Macmillan, 1950), p. 15.

remarks deserve to be quoted in some detail:

One of his (Ezra Pound's) greatest triumphs in London was the way in which he stormed 18 Woburn Buildings, the Celtic Stronghold of W.B. Yeats, took charge of his famous "Mondays" precisely as he took charge of the South Lodge tennis parties, and succeeded in reducing him from master to disciple. The "later" Yeats which is now so universally admired was unmistakably influenced by Pound.²⁰

The contact with Ezra Pound and (on his insistence) a fresh reading of Donne affected greatly the quality of Yeats's poetry especially his later poetry. It will not be fruitful to go into great detail about the exact nature of Pound's influence on Yeats's poetry which the present study proposes to analyse, because this poetry belongs to his early phase.

In tracing the origins of his early poetry we come across a distinct branch of knowledge to which Yeats's poetry owes much of its originality and freshness, i.e., Occultism. Occultism in Yeats's early poetry is a common knowledge of all Yeats students. We know that Yeats from his very childhood was very much attracted to the Irish folk tales which

20. "Yeats, Pound and Ford at Woburn" in E.H. Mikhail, ed., Interviews and Recollections, vol.I (London, Macmillan Press, 1977), p. 42.

were primarily tales of magic and romance. This childhood preoccupation with fairy stories later on blossomed into a deep and engrossing interest in Occultism. It became crucial to the development of his poetic works. What Yeats was searching for was a system of thought which would liberate his imagination to create whatever he chose and make all that he created a part of the history of the progress of the soul. His deep interest in Occultism and his attempt to unite this interest with his patriotic fervour made some believe that he was "whittling down the spirituality of the Irish until it could appear mere evidence of an atavistic tendency or a parody of some Eastern cult."²¹ This explains how difficult it was for Yeats to try and introduce something novel to Irish readers and the realm of English literature.

It was an arduous task to systematise the seemingly alien, remote and bizarre tales of the peasants. The reason for their remoteness was the absence of an explanatory intellect in them. Farag has commented on this aspect as follows:

A systematization of these fragments into an integral and living pattern was essential if

21. Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 152.

they were to be useful for his purpose. The Theosophists came readily to his help, for they accepted and incorporated into their system, ghosts and fairies and regarded dreams and symbols as supernatural manifestations.²²

Among his earliest influences it was no doubt Theosophy that gave Yeats his first systematic introduction to the Occult tradition. In London he became a member of Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. The Society believed in no creation but in the periodical appearance of the universe from the subjective to the objective plane at regular intervals of time. After some time Yeats was asked to leave the Theosophical Society because of his obsessive thirst for esoteric knowledge and his unabated enthusiasm for experimentation in this field. "Although Yeats was forced to leave the Society, he was not bitter; and indeed if he had not been such an inquiring maverick, he might have maintained his membership even though he had already found a congenial climate for his occult experiments."²³ It was through the Theosophical Society and the constant mention of his book Kabbalah Unveiled (a translation) that Yeats got acquainted

22. "Oriental and Celtic Elements in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats", in D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds., Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats (Ibadan, The University Press, 1965), p. 46.

23. George Mills Harper, Yeats Golden Dawn (Northamptonshire, Aquarian Press, 1974), p. 8.

with Mathers.

The Kabbalah believed that the Supreme Being was boundless in His nature and was incomprehensible to man's limited faculties. So they described Him through negative adjectives such as "the unknowable and the nameless one." We can see how much Yeats's poetry owes to these mystical organisations by observing his constant use of the "Rose" symbol which had many associations, and Godhead is one of them. For this Yeats has used negative adjectives "The Incorruptible Rose" and "Inviolable Rose."

Yeats's resort to Kabbalistic philosophy deepened the roots of his symbolic poetry. It also became a middle path between the influence of the Samkaric and Theosophistic philosophies. The philosophy of Samkara, as taught by Mohini Chatterji (a young Brahmin from India), had proved to be too abstract for Yeats. Theosophy was opposed to experiments in general and to the performance of phenomenon in particular. The Kabbalah, on the other hand, through certain rituals and practices, promised man a power which could be demonstrated. The purpose of his joining the Kabbalistic order was to find out whether he could command any spiritual power.

It is interesting to note the paradoxical influences Samkara and Kabbalah had on Yeats. While Samkara held matter to

be a hinderance between man and God, the Kabbalah held that matter was a means or ladder to reach God. The Kabbalah helped him greatly to struggle out of the Samkaric abstraction into which he had fallen in his early youth. It also gave him a deeper insight into Blake whose philosophy was the anti-thesis of Samkaric philosophy. Some critics have traced the influence of Kabbalistic philosophy in The Wanderings of Oisín. Yeats has himself asserted thus in one of his letters to Katharine Tynan :

In the second part of "Oisín" under the disguise of symbolism, I have said several things to which I only have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did, it would spoil the art. Yet the whole poem is full of symbols - if it be full of aught but clouds.²⁴

The fundamental ideas that Yeats derived from the Kabbalah were firstly, the transmigration of souls, that is, the souls are sent to the earth to become perfect for reabsorption into God, and secondly, that the world with all its good and evil has emanated from God and will be absorbed into Him to re-emanate at His will.

24. The Letters of W.B. Yeats, p. 88.

His initiation into the Kabbalistic philosophy supplemented him with a method to evoke dreams and images which were the pathways of communication with the World's Memory. It made him aware of the contraries present in nature and the need to reconcile them. These points became the fundamental principles of his poetic philosophy later on. In 1913, the year of his personal and national disappointment, he once more turned to spiritualism and to Swedenborg who thenceforth exercised the most pronounced influence on his writings and thought.

Yeats accepted with certain modifications what Swedenborg²⁵ had to say regarding the survival of the soul after death, and its dreaming back and reliving its earthly life repeatedly. He made use of these ideas in several of his poems, and two of his plays, The Dreaming of the Bones and Calvary.

The formative years of the growth of Yeats's poetic mind were those when Ireland was involved in the struggle for independence. W.B. Yeats who was an Irish nationalist was expected not to have been untouched by this prolonged strife. He did come in contact with the pioneers of the

25. Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. XXII, p. 759.

Independence movement and had had discussions with them about the ways and means for the redemption of Ireland. But he did not get actively involved in political activities. Sitting in his Sligo house or his London residence, he privately monitored the political activities into experiences in his mind which find expression in some of the poems of his middle and final phase. "Easter Rising" and "The Second Coming" give us a glimpse of the direction in which Yeats's poetically, fully developed mind was responsive to the political scenario of Ireland.

But it was John 'O' Leary who was ultimately to have the most lasting influence upon his national and political outlook. Yeats was introduced to him at the Dublin Contemporary Club, a discussion group founded and presided over by C.H. Oldham of Trinity College. Yeats's interest in the Irish national movement first became serious under the spell of O' Leary's personality and idealism. Out of his fascination grew his longing for a cultural unity to be achieved by combining an enlightened nationalism with literature. However, his ideas of Irish nationalism remained confined to remote Irish folklore. It would not be fruitful to go into the details of Yeats's political career (which influenced his later poetry) as we are only concerned here with the influences which contributed to the originality and ideas in his early poetry.

Although critics have been largely concerned with Yeats's mature poetry of the middle and later years, there are also a few critics who have found the seeds of Yeats's blossoming literary genius in his early poetry. Yeats's early poetry though apparently lacking in seriousness of purpose and theme has been given credit by some critics :

But even in this earliest period his thin poetizing seems to have meant more to Yeats than the conventional practice of a craft; the images of beauty and strangeness which collected out of Spenser and Shelley and other less distinguished influences were intended in some vague way to represent an imaginative world of values which would compensate him both for his lost religion and for the confused and prosaic nature of everyday existence.²⁶

The above quotation makes it clear that David Daiches has noted a world of imagination and a world of natural beauty in Yeats's early poems. Edmund Wilson has made a somewhat similar discovery : "The world of imagination is shown to us in Yeats's early poetry as something infinitely delightful, infinitely seductive, as something to which one becomes addicted, with which one becomes delirious and drunken — and

26. David Daiches, The Permanence of Yeats, Selected Criticism, p. 123.

as something which is somehow incompatible and fatal to, the good life of that actual world which is so full of weeping and from which it is so sweet to withdraw."²⁷ Opposed to Wilson's view of escapism is H.S. Krans's assessment which accredits Yeats's early poetry with a spiritual quality :

He shuns the distractions of the workday world and courts the solitary delights of the spirit. His poems are full of thought, spirituality and lyrical phantasy, and have a music that is subtle, sweet and beguiling. They are the product of an exacting artistic conscience, and every where wrought with utmost care... ²⁸

The natural beauty, the world of imagination or the spiritual beauty that critics have discovered in Yeats's early poetry are only links in the development of his poetic career. Allen Tate has commented on the reversal of the romantic mood of the earlier poems to the intellectual mood in the later poems. David Daiches has observed that :

While it is true that Yeats, like every poet in English since the end of the eighteenth century, began with a romantic use of language in the early poems , he ended up very differently... If one of the historic marks of

27. The Permanence of Yeats, p. 18.

28. William Butler Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival (London, Heinemann, 1905), pp. 107-8.

romanticism is the division between sensibility and intellect, Yeats's career may be seen as unromantic (I do not know the opposite term) because he closed the gap.²⁹

There is no doubt that the intellectual mood of the later poems is also present in the earlier poems. This intellectual mood is present in the earlier poems because of Yeats's concern with contraries and his borrowings from Theosophy, Indian philosophy and Kabbalistic philosophy as David Daiches has said:

In his search for a compensating tradition Yeats went first to romantic literature, and then to mysticism of one kind and another, to folklore, theosophy, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism and finally elaborated a symbolic system of his own based on a variety of sources and in terms of this was able to give pattern and coherence to the expression of his thought.³⁰

Peter Ure has also discovered a pattern of thought in Yeats's early poems, predominantly so in The Wind Among the Reeds :

Yet in these writings can be traced many later poetic "assertions" and "convictions." Two of the most important are the notion of a coming change in the world,... before it is

29. The Permanence of Yeats, p. 109.

30. Ibid., p.119

rent in interlocking catastrophe and revelation, and of rebirth and its counterpart, the hope of escape from the round of incarnations into a changeless and immortal existence.³¹

The thought pattern suggested by Peter Ure and other critics is the beginning of the long chain of growing poetic symbolism. Ellmann points out to the same pattern through his analysis of the presence of the protagonist in Yeats's works in the early, middle and last phases of his poetic career : "as the frustrated, unsuccessful lover of the early verse, as the hounded public figure of the middle period, as the time struck, age worn old man of the later work..."³²

Contrary to the view taken by critics that the early poems are minor in poetic value, Colin Wilson has affirmed "that the early poems have a unity of poetic mood, and establish as distinct a poetic personality as any of the fin de siecle period, while the later poems reveal the evaporation of the poetic mood."³³ The distinction that Wilson assigns to Yeats's early poetry is that of freshness, originality and romanticism which was lost in the terseness

31. Yeats, p. 38.

32. The Identity of Yeats (London, Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 5.

33. Poetry and Mysticism (London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 126.

and complexity of the later verse.

All the views that have been briefly summarised above point to the seriousness of purpose in Yeats's earlier poems which is manifested through the poet's quest towards greater artistic merit. But quite often critics have dealt with Yeats's early poems as a whole and scant attention has been paid to the individual poems to identify serious themes like that of quest.

Our analysis in the following chapters of some of the selected poems from the early phase of Yeats's poetic career will confirm that even during this phase the poet was concerned with serious problems. One of these problems is that of quest. In the interest of economy of space and because of its being widely dealt with by critics, The Wanderings of Oisín has not been considered. The collections that have been selected to work out the idea of quest are Crossways, The Rose, and The Wind Among the Reeds.

CHAPTER II

CROSSWAYS

Crossways published in 1889 was preceded by Yeats's reading of Pater's "The Renaissance," published in 1873. He had also imbibed some ideas from Indian philosophy through Mohini Chatterji, the theosophist, who visited Dublin in 1885. He was much influenced by the Samkaric doctrine taught by Mohini Chatterji.

There is an impression of escapism present in the poems. Cowell has rightly observed that "the prevailing emotional atmosphere of Crossways is one of fading love and remembered joy, of yearning for escape from an unsatisfactory world."¹ This escapism owes much to the escapist philosophies of Pater and Mohini Chatterji. In all the poems in this collection there is a quest to transcend the harsh realities of human existence. Unterecker has observed that "the antithesis between youth and age and the anguish or mortality itself serve as common themes to bind together these poems..."²

There is an attempt to find this transcendence in nature. The quest in all the poems of this collection has

1. W.B. Yeats (London, Evans Brothers Ltd., 1969), p. 18.

2. A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats (London, Thames and Hudson, 1959), p. 74.

a natural background whether of the Indian or the Irish countryside. L. Robinson has observed "... but to read that early volume, Crossways (1889), is to find that every poem save the Indian ones, bears the stamp of Irish country character and Irish country scene."³ Infact in Crossways Yeats is seeking a medium in nature to build up a system of thought. The first three poems which have been taken up for analysis deal with nature as a philosophic or artistic medium of quest. The next three poems deal with quest as a kind of refuge into the physical beauty and vitality of nature. The natural background coupled with nostalgia and yearning has given a romantic colouring to the entire collection.

In "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" there is a quest to transcend the misery of mundane existence. In the opening lines of the poem there is a note of disappointment and a bewailing of the loss of beauty and joy in the modern world:

The woods of Arcady are dead,
and over is their antique joy;
Of old, the world on dreaming fed;
Grey Truth is now her painted toy;⁴

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3. "William Butler Yeats: Personality" in A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds., In Excited Reverie (London, Macmillan, 1965), pp. 22-23.
 4. The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, Peter Allt & Russel K. Alspach eds., (New York, Macmillan, 1957), pp. 64-65. (All subsequent textual references are to this edition.)

The loss which is regretted is that of a world of beauty which has sustained the human soul and intellect in the cultural past of our life. As contrasted with the old world which survived on dreams, the new world is surviving on a "grey truth." The "grey truth" is a sad ugly truth which is that the world has lost its happiness and peace. "The painted toy" refers to the materialistic world's unreality, superficiality and meaninglessness.

The following lines refer to Chronos, a pre-hellenic deity of fertility who is singing a cracked tune to which the world is dancing.

In dreary dancing past us whirled,
To the cracked tune that Chronos sings,⁵

The fact that Chronos is singing a cracked tune indicates that the modern world is a barren world, devoid of meaning and beauty.

The innocence and beauty of the old world was also composed of the grandeur of its kings. The modern world has begun to demean their grandeur :

Where are now the warring Kings ?
And idle word is now their glory,

5. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp.64-65.

By the stammering school boy said,
 Reading some entangled story:
 The kings of old time are dead;⁶

The glory and the monument of these kings is made up by the few idle words uttered reluctantly by a schoolboy. The emphasis on their death reveals a stage of forgetfulness and oblivion of the heroic world and its ideals. The heroic past has been reduced to mere curricular relevance and is recalled sometimes without much meaning attached to it :

The wandering earth herself may be
 Only a sudden flaming word,
 In clanging space a moment heard,
 Troubling the endless reverie.⁷

The lines suggest that the world is not even certain about existence. That is to say that man through his intellect has reduced his own existence to a mere figment of his imagination. This is precisely what Edward Engelburg is trying to assert in saying that "these lines represent Yeats's view of a self-generating and world-creating Imagination."⁸

The earth represents human life which is vacillating between doubt and certainty, belief and disbelief. It may be

6. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp.64-65.

7. Ibid.

8. "He too was in Arcadia: Yeats and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," in A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds., In Excited Reverie, p. 85.

only a flaming word (a sheaf of manuscripts, or a collection of theories or controversies) which does nothing to inspire the moral fibre of humanity. Instead, it only weakens it. "Troubling the endless reverie" refers to the disturbance created in the old peaceful cosmos.

In the second part of the poem the shepherd's advice is that beauty and joy cannot be regained by seeking the truth. This is so because the only truth that the world possesses is about its ugliness, uncertainty, unreality and aimlessness. Let us consider the following lines :

Lest all thy toiling only breeds
New dreams, new dreams; there is no truth
Saving in thine own heart.⁹

For the shepherd the only escape that can be found from the misery of the present world lies in turning inward where alone truth is to be discovered. But this truth will be a subjective truth. F.F. Farag has discovered in these lines the influence of the Samkaric doctrine which believes in not only the abandonment of action but the abandonment of thought itself, for both, it considers, are futile : "here is all the consciousness of the triviality and vulgarity of action in 'dusty deeds': even hunger after truth is to be abandoned,

9. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 64-65.

for after all it is a hunger and can only breed desires and illusions. The truth is in one's heart; the soul should feed on 'the ashes of the heart'.¹⁰

The following lines indicate how much Yeats held scientists responsible for making the world an inhuman and unlivable a place :

... Seek, then,
No learning from the starry men,
... No word of theirs — the cold star bane
Has cloven and rent their hearts in twain,
And dead is all their human truth.¹¹

Raymond Cowell has asserted that the scientists' search for truth is intellectual and hence futile.¹² The scientists in pursuit of the trails of the stars have forgotten human life. Their discoveries and theories offer nothing but doubt and scepticism. The shepherd's advice is to seek refuge in nature instead. He says that mute nature can have a cathartic effect on the human mind.

In the last part of the poem the shepherd speaks of going to the grave which is symbolic of his death :

10. "Oriental and Celtic Elements in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats" in D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds, W.B. Yeats Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats, pp. 35-36.

11. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 66.

12. W.B. Yeats, (London, Evans Brothers, Ltd., 1969), p.17.

I must be gone : there is a grave
 Where daffodil and lily wave,
 And I would please the hapless fawn.
 Buried under the sleepy ground,
 With mirthful songs before the dawn.¹³

The death of the quester suggests his union with nature. It also symbolises the fusion of the quester with the quest. This fusion is actually the Shepherd's dream. The Shepherd dreams that through his union with the earth he will be able to regain the lost joy and beauty of the old earth.

Harold Bloom has connected this poem with a song Yeats used in an epilogue to the two earlier collections of his poems. The chant offers the hypothesis that our world may be only a sudden flaming word, soon to be silenced. It also emphasises the futility of action and the utility of dreaming as its own end.¹⁴ This is quite clear from the resolution of the quest in a dream.

A.S. Collins has discovered an artistic motive in this poem, "Words alone are certain good," suggests that the beauty of poetry is the only lasting truth.¹⁵

Like the earlier poem, in "The Song of the Sad Shepherd"

13. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 67 .

14. Yeats, (London, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 54 .

15. English Literature of the Twentieth Century
 (London, University Tutorial Press Ltd., 1962), p. 16 .

too, we find a quest for happiness. In both the poems nature has been used as a medium to achieve the object of quest, but nature represents different things in both the poems.

Colin Wilson has assigned to this poem merely Yeats's aim to evoke an autumnal mood of beauty, mingled with fatigue, sadness and desolation.¹⁶ But this is not quite borne out by a close scrutiny of the text of the poem. Let us consider the opening lines of the poem :

There was a man whom sorrow named his friend,
And he, of his high comrade sorrow dreaming,
Went walking slow steps along the gleaming
And humming sands, where windy surges wend :¹⁷

We are introduced to the quester, the Shepherd who is "walking with slow steps" under the powerful spell of sorrow. "The gleaming and humming sands" and the "windy surges" are the source of his sorrow. They are not merely the visual and auditory realization of the vitality and beauty of nature. They also represent the ephemeral splendours of life and the human desire for them which creates bondage to sorrow.

16. Poetry and Mysticism (London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1970), p. 133.

17. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 67-68.

The shepherd then turns to the stars for comfort,
which symbolize more than just the physical beauty of nature:

And he called loudly to the stars to bend
From their pale thrones and comfort him but they
Among themselves laugh on and sing always :¹⁸

These stars are on pale thrones which represent the darkness around them. They suggest the soul's turning to philosophy and wisdom in order to seek release from sorrow. But the man of sorrow finds no respite in abstract concepts, just as in the earlier poem the shepherd warns us against turning towards the intellectual pursuits of scientists.

He then cries out to the dim sea to listen to his piteous story, but "the sea swept on and cried her old cry still." The sea here represents the faceless crowd of humanity. The man thinks that the sea of humanity will respond to his piteous story but it continues to cry its own cry.

This is so because it is caught in the flux of time and is burdened by a larger sorrow of materialism than his own. The cry of the sea is overwhelming and the man then seeks to escape the "glory" (the resplendent majesty of sorrow) that rules over the entire humanity. He escapes

18. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 68.

into a far off valley and tells his sad story to the dew drops :

Cried all his story to the dew drops glistening,
But naught they heard, for they are always listening
The dew drops, for the sound of their own dropping.¹

These dew drops represent his elusive quest. The dew drops, which are preoccupied with listening to the sound of their own dropping, suggest his own ego, i.e. his involvement with himself. This too is a borrowing from Indian philosophy — that the soul takes birth into life and suffers because of its attachment to the ego.

The quest for happiness for his own self is futile. This is because he desires a personal immortality by whispering his sorrow into a sea shell :

Then he sang softly nigh the pearly rim;
But the sad dweller by the sea ways lone
Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan
Among her wildering whirls forgetting him.²⁰

But the quester is unable to achieve a personal immortality or a personal escape from sorrow, for his song is lost in the moaning of the sea.

19. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 68.

20. Ibid.

The quest in this poem can also be understood to be an artist's resolution of sorrow. Yeats feels that Art is an expression of human experience and cannot be divorced from humanity. The artist's purpose cannot be an individual quest for happiness; for his quest for happiness is the quest of entire humanity. In this way we see that the quest has not been defeated, but it has developed into a larger quest. David Daiches suggests that the poem represents nature's continuous betrayal of man's expectations which has been a part of the pattern of reality.²¹ This criticism can apply to the poem only on a literal level, because on a deeper level, nature symbolizes humanity which constitutes the basis and corpus for art.

In "The Indian Upon God" the validity of subjective truth, explored in the two Shepherd poems analysed alone, finds a clearer statement. The poem presents alternative conceptualisations of reality or the nature of God. God is perceived according to the nature and form of the perceiver. Balachandra Rajan has taken this poem to mean "... man making the divine obstinately in his image..."²²

21. "The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns," in A Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross. eds., In Excited Reverie, pp. 49-50.

22. W.B. Yeats : A Critical Introduction (London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 180.

The beginning of the quest has the background of nature, and the restive endeavour of the self to quest is presented in the opening lines of the poem :

I passed along the water's edge below the humid
trees
My spirit rocked in evening light, the rushes
round my knees,
My spirit rocked in sleep and sighs;²³

The "sighing" of the soul, "rocked in sleep," indicates the initial despair because the quest was implicitly for absolute and objectively verifiable reality, transcending any controversy or difference of vision. It is the "sighing" that invokes the soul into a quest for the true nature of God. The quester first comes across the moor fowls flying about with their feathers dripping with water :

Who holds the world between His bill
and made us strong or weak
Is an undying moorfowl, and He lives beyond
the sky.
The rains are from His dripping wing,
the moonbeams from his eye.²⁴

The moorfowls perceive God as a giant moorfowl holding the world in His bill. They also believe that He is the Creator

23. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 76.

24. Ibid.

of the world. The fact that He makes the moorfowl "strong or weak" means not only the strength and weakness of the world, but that its creator and destroyer, i.e. the life and death of the world, are in the hands of God. That He "is an undying moorfowl" suggests the eternity of God and His living beyond the sky represents His conceptualised existence rather than a concretised reality. The "rains" from his wings and the "moon beams" from his eyes imply the coexistence of physical and spiritual life on the highest plane of existence. The highest form of existence is one in which the polarities are resolved and harmonized.

The quester then hears the Lotus talk about the nature of God :

... He hangeth on a stalk
 For I am in his image made,
 and all this tinkling tide
 Is but a sliding drop of rain
 between his petals wide.²⁵

The Lotus perceives God as a Lotus hanging on a stalk like itself. The Lotus which is rooted in the mud represents the supremacy of the intellect over matter. Thus God is represented on this plane as the intellect. We also observe that the petals of the Lotus have been referred to and they

25. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 76.

represent various intellectual constituents. The "tinkling tide" which slips like a drop of rain through the petals is the inspiration or creativity of God which passes through all the petals (intellectual constituents).

Just before the quester comes across the roebuck he refers to the aura of gloom. This is a clear result of the substitution of the intellect for the spirit. When the roebuck lifts its eyes they are filled with starlight which is a decrease from the moon-beams in the moorfowls' eyes. This certainly suggests as a still lower plane of existence.

The roebuck represents desire, emotions, feelings and an absence of even the intellectual principle represented by the Lotus. The roebuck says about God :

... The Stamper of the skies,
 He is a gentle roebuck; for how else,
 I pray, could he
 Conceive a thing so sad and soft,
 a gentle thing like me ?²⁶

The action implied by the noun "Stamper" suggest swift movement. On a deeper level it symbolizes transience and the illusoriness of this plane of existence. Also, on this plane of existence there is no reference to the dripping

26. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 76-77.

water, which means a lack of the Creativity of God. Although the deer sees God's attributes as a superior version of its own grace, gentleness and sadness, it belongs to a plane of mere physical or animal beauty.

The quester moves lower down the scale and comes across the peacock, which has not even its own beauty, but beauty which is a reflection of the beauty of the universe. The peacock describes God as follows :

Who made the grass and made the worms
and made my feathers gay,
He is a monstrous peacock, and He waveth
all the night
His languid tail above us, lit with
myriad spots of light.²⁷

We find that by referring to the Creator Who made the grass and worms and the peacock's feathers at the same time, Yeats is trying to convince us about this lowest level of existence, through the equality of the peacock to the grass and worms. Another word which suggests that this is the lowest rung of the ladder is that the peacock perceives God as a "monstrous" peacock. The term "monstrous" reflects the animality and materialism of this plane of existence. The peacock also affirms that the universe, studded with stars, is the giant

27. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 77,

tail of God (the peacock). The term "languid" attached to the "tail" denigrates the image of the tail lit with myriad spots of light. The term "languid" suggests spiritlessness and lack of vigour. The tail of the monstrous peacock is therefore not really the universe but only a reflection of it.

Therefore the knowledge the quester gains about the nature of God is that on the highest level God is a unity of the polarities of matter and spirit. This unity is suggested by the moorfowl that lives on land and flies in the air.

The Lotus is on a lower level because it embodies the intellectual effort to perceive the unity of God. The deer is on a still lower level because it tries (through feeling, desire and emotion) to understand God. The peacock symbolizes the lowest level of existence which is only able to reflect the beauty of the universe which reflects the beauty of God.

F.F. Farag has remarked about the nature of the quest thus : "The Indian discovers that the personal conception of the divinity is a magnified form of the ^(self) of the thinker."²⁸

28. "Oriental and Celtic Elements in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats" in D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds., Centenary Essays on Art of W.B. Yeats, p. 39.

In the second stanza we discover that the lovers have found this island as the ideal refuge for their love :

Murmuring softly lip to lip,
Along the grass, along the sands,
Murmuring how far away are the
unquiet lands :³¹

This island seems to be a world of dream and unreality when contrasted with the unquiet lands (the world of reality) that they have left behind.

The third stanza brings out more clearly the lover's escape into nature :

How we alone of mortals are
Hid under quiet boughs apart,
While our love grows an Indian star,
A meteor of the burning heart,
One with the tide that gleams, the wings
That gleam and dart,³²

The lovers feel as if they are distinctly privileged in taking his decision, because of all mortals they alone are secure in the quietude of the boughs which is conducive to the most passionate blossoming of their love. The lovers

31. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 78.

32. Ibid.

Nandini Pillai Kuehn has felt that the parrot raging at its image in the first stanza anticipated the inability of love to find ideal fulfilment on earth and hence a failure of the quest.³⁴ In "Ephemera," too, as in the earlier poem, there is^a quest for the permanence of love. As in the earlier poem here, too, the decay in nature hints at the transience of human passion. The poem, in fact, explores the journey from transience to immortality through amorous pursuance.

It is interesting to note that Ephemera is the name of a shortlived May fly which lives near the water. The title "Ephemera," therefore, suggests transitoriness, flight, movement and quest. The opening stanza is a description of the waning of love between the lovers :

Your eyes that once were never weary of mine
Are bowed in sorrow under pendulous lids,
Because our love is waning.³⁵

The present condition of waning love is deduced from the earlier state when the beloved's "eyes were never weary of" constantly looking at her lover. This waning is not of real love but that of physical passion. This waning of physical

34. "Yeats: The Indian to His Love" in J. Edwin Whitesell, ed., The Explicator, vol.33, 1974,

35. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 79.

passion is brought by the passage of time :

Together in that hour of gentleness
 When the poor tired child, Passion, falls asleep.
 How far away the stars seem, and how far
 Is our first kiss, and ah, how old my heart !³⁶

Through the wearing out of physical passions and their physical frames, the poet is obliquely hinting at the immortality of the soul.

In the following lines we find that the decay in the natural background projects the transience and eventual decay of physical passion :

The woods were round them, and the yellow leaves
 Fell like faint meteors in the gloom, and once
 A rabbit old and lame limped down the path;
 Autumn was over him: and now they stood
 On the lone border of the lake once more :³⁷

"The yellow leaves," the "faint meteors," the "rabbit old and lame" all build up the autumnal tone of the transience of physical passion. "The lone border of the lake" by which the lovers want to stand, is the central image of the poem. It has also occurred in the first stanza. The fact that the lovers want to return to it as they had done when it

36. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 80.

37. Ibid.

was the spring of their love means that the lake stands for the immortality of their souls.

The lake brings hope to their quest for transcendence of transience and for permanence of love. Because their souls are immortal their quest for the permanence of love will not be defeated owing to the waning of physical passion. This hopefulness in the lover's quest for the permanence of love is brought out clearly in the last stanza :

Ah, do not mourn, he said,
That we are tired, for other loves await us;
Hate on and love through unrepining hours.
Before us lies eternity; our souls
Are love, and a continual farewell.³⁸

A.S. Collins has remarked that this waning of love is an assertion that the world is no place for immortal love.³⁹ Thus the quest becomes eternal, transcending human existence which does not encourage permanence or perfection.

In "The Stolen Child" the quest is in the form of an escape from the world of reality into the wild and natural world of the fairies. On a higher level the refuge in the wild and natural world of fairies also stands for an artist's

38. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 80-81.

39. English Literature of the Twentieth Century
(London, University Tutorial Press, Ltd., 1962), p.17.

quest to find perfection and fulfillment in Art or the world of imagination.

The poem opens with the child being enticed by the fairies into the beautiful and fascinating world of nature :

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
The drowsy water-rats;
There we've hid our faery vats
Full of berries
And of reddest stolen cherries.⁴⁰

The image of the "flapping herons waking the drowsy water-rats" is very similar to the fairies' attempt to awaken the child whose senses have been dulled by reality like the drowsy water rats. The temptation by the fairies through "berries" and "reddest stolen cherries" is a resort to sensuous imagery. The presence of this sensuous imagery tells us that the quest is not towards a liberation from the world of senses but a liberation from the sorrow of reality.

The following stanza is a refrain or a song which is repeated again at the end of the second and the third stanzas :

40. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 86-87.

Come away, O human child !
 To the waters and the wild
 With a faery, hand in hand
 For the world's more full of weeping
 than you can understand.⁴¹

Its repetition suggests the eternal and continuous temptation of the muse for the artist since time immemorial. The repetition also gives strength to the conviction that the quest is somewhat Paterian in its escape from reality (which is incomprehensible) into the world of Art which becomes a refuge.

The following stanza is a conjunction of the world of reality and the world of imagination in which the fairies describe their merry making in the world of humans by night:

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
 The dim grey sands with light,
 Far off by furthest Rosses
 We foot it all the night,
 Weaving olden dances,
 Mingling hands and mingling glances
 Till the moon has taken flight;
 To and fro we leap
 and chase the frothy bubbles.⁴²

The fairies make the assertion of the fact that their merry

41. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 87.

42. Ibid.

making and love in the human world lasts only till the moonlight covers the dim sands. This is a subtle illustration of the illusoriness of love and happiness in the human world. Through a negation of the world of reality (which they have already experienced) the fairies hope to arouse the child into a quest for the fairy world.

In the third stanza there is a contrast between ferns (static) and young streams (moving) in the following lines :

... From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.⁴³

The ferns that represent the immortality of Art are shown to embody or nourish the young streams that stand for the mortality of human life. Yet again the fairies try to tell the child that experiences in the world lose their meaning in the incomprehensibility of weeping and these experiences can be eternised through Art and imagination.

The final stanza deals with the child's ultimate succumbing to the fairies' plea and temptation. On the symbolic level it is the artist being seized by the quest towards fulfilment, immortality and perfection in Art.

43. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 88.

Robert W. Caswell identifies in this poem an unresolved tension between the desire of the spirit for immortality and the mortal desires of the body.⁴⁴ But the tension is resolved as the child gives up the domestic world for the wild, natural world of the fairies. The following lines are a description of the world that the child is leaving behind :

He'll hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast
Or see the brown mice bob ...⁴⁵

We find here that the terms "lowing of the calves," "the warm hillside," "the kettle on the hob" and "the brown mice" suggest domestic peace and contentment. The child or the artist earlier sought happiness in domestic life which bred contentment and could not create a yearning for a higher existence. The poem, therefore, ends in the positive resolution of questing or seeking out a world superior to the world of reality, i.e. the world of imagination. David Daiches has said about the last stanza of the poem that the lowing of calves, and the brown mice stand for domestic

44. "Yeats, The Stolen Child," in J. Edwin Whitesell ed., The Explicator, vol. 25, 1967. Refer to page 107.

45. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 88.

bliss and friendly humanizing of natural objects. This world is "represented as something rashly given up in exchange for something cold and inhuman,"⁴⁶

But what the child actually rejects is the superficial contentment of human life and these objects are hindrances in the quest for a higher existence. For the world of the fairies is a world of spiritual development which will bring enlightenment and is superhuman rather than an ahuman world.

As observed in the poems just considered, all the poems have a rich natural background. The quest is actually an escape from the mundane world into the world of nature. In the first three poems Nature is a resolution to the quest of the Shepherds and the Indian on an artistic and philosophic level. But the two poems which deal with the quest for the perfection of love, "Ephemera" and "The Indian to His Love" transcend even the refuge of nature. Yeats seems to realize that nature too is subject to time like human beings. Whatever the nature and object of quest, one thing which is firmly established is that there is a higher level of existence. But the world of phenomena is not totally rejected.

46. "The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns," in A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds, In Excited Reverie, p. 54.

CHAPTER III

ROSE

The Rose poems appearing in 1893 were preceded by Yeats's strenuous engagement with Madam Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, his disagreements with her and finally his discovery of the order of the Golden Dawn. This explains the presence of the Occult and spiritual influences in these poems. But this is not to say that the interpretation of these poems should be confined within the framework of these influences only. W.Y. Tindall has aptly observed about the wider symbolic implications of these poems : "The symbol of the rose in Yeats's poems and stories... was personal as well as occult and he used the rose to mean more than Father Christian Rosy Cross or Mac Gregor Mathers intended."¹ F.R. Leavis's remark is along the lines of Tindall's : "His second collection of poems, The Rose (1893), frankly brings the cult of 'Eternal beauty wandering on her way', with its Red Rose of 'an unimagined revelation', into the world of Irish lore. But there is still a certain esoteric languor about this phase..."²

Although the title of his collection is "The Rose"

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1. James Hall & Martin Steinmann, eds., The Permanence of Yeats: Selected Criticism (New York, Macmillan, 1950) p. 271.
 2. Ibid. p. 168.

yet it has poems dealing with other subjects as well. There is a recurrent pattern of quest underlying the thematic unity of the poems contained in this collection. The quest, by and large as we have noticed in the poems analysed in the preceding chapter, is characterised by transcendence of material life and journey into a spiritual realm of permanence.

In "Fergus and the Druid" Fergus,³ the King, is in quest of the Druidic wisdom. But such a quest can only be started after the king exchanges his kingly status for the life of the Druid (the shape-changing of fairies). The king is first shown in pursuit of the Druid who is moving from shape to shape. Finally the king is confronted with the Druid in a human shape :

First as a raven on whose ancient wings
Scarcely a feather lingered, then you seemed
A weasel moving on from stone to stone,
And now at last you wear a human shape,
A thin grey man half lost in gathering night.⁴

The Druid then asks him the reason for his pursuit. Fergus answers that he wants to get rid of his kingly status.

3. Fergus a legendary king of Ulster married Ness. She persuaded him to allow her son by a previous marriage, Conchubar, to rule for a year in his stead and effectively tricked him out of his kingdom at the end of the year. Fergus lived out his days hunting, fighting and feasting in the woods.

4. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 102.

He praises the wisdom of Concobar, who tricked him of his kingdom, for it was a burden on his head. Fergus is not bothered about Concobar's wickedness, and motives in his rapacious deed but is thankful to him for relieving him of the burden which would be a potential hindrance in the fulfilment of his desire for transcendence from his mundane existence. This transcendence is possible only through his acquisition of the Druidic wisdom.

In order to achieve this transcendence the king had taken up the life of the woods, but he had always felt the crippling weight of the crown upon his head. Hence he wants to lay down the weight as well as adopt a different path — Druidic wisdom — for his quest.

The Druid himself is a quester after esoteric wisdom. He points out to the king his old and battered physical form which is the result of this endless quest :

Look on my thin grey hair and hollow cheeks
And on these hands that may not lift the sword,
This body trembling like a wind blown reed.
No woman's loved me, no man sought my help.⁵

The Druid is talking about his failure in achieving the object of his quest and his isolation from others as a result of his

5. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 103.

failure. Also the terms, which suggest physical weakness, such as "thin grey hair," "hollow cheeks," "body like a wind blown reed" and "hands that may not lift the sword," indicate the near total annihilation of the physical self in the quest. But the king considers his kingly status more barren than that of the Druid, which has no dream or yearning for a quest.

The Druid then hands the king a bag of dreams or, in other words, initiates the king into the mysterious quest for Druidic wisdom. The king then starts out on the quest. The final stanza of the poem suggests the passage of time and the passage of the king from one change to another :

I see my life go drifting like a river
 From change to change; I have been many things —
 A green drop in the surge, a gleam of light
 Upon a sword, a fir tree on a hill,
 An old slave grinding at a heavy quern,
 A king sitting upon a chair of gold —⁶

The reference to all the things he has been has symbolic meanings which give significance and contribute to the development of the quest. The image of "a greendrop in the surge" is suggestive of being caught up in the flux of time;

6. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 104.

the image "of a gleam of light upon a sword" is suggestive of a struggle to escape the flux of time and the transience of human life; "fir tree on a hill" symbolizes aspiration, dreams and longings; "the old slave grinding at a heavy quern" suggests a bondage or slavery to these desires. This slavery or bondage to desire makes him "a king sitting upon a chair of gold" which echoes the crux of Indian philosophy — that the quest for transcendence will not be successful so long as the king is attached to his ego or self.

The ironic and painful situation of the king as observed in the following lines has been variously interpreted by critics :

But now I have grown nothing, knowing all
Ah ! Druid, Druid how great webs of sorrow
Lay hidden in the small state coloured thing !⁷

Ellmann has discussed this stanza with reference to the theme of the poem : "which, however, is not his (king's) discovery of past lives, but the pain which he experiences on surrendering his power as a king and man of action in return for even such spectacular knowledge."⁸

The explanation however does not bring out the idea of

7. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 104.

8. The Identity of Yeats (London, Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 47.

the king's quest for transcendence and the pain is more because of his inability to gain transcendence rather than his regret for surrendering his kingly status. F.F. Farag has identified and discussed in the last stanza of the poem the nostalgia for a dream world which is all knowledge and no action.⁹ But, in fact, it is the dream itself which holds the action and not the nostalgia. For if the quest, involving one change to another, had not caused any effect resulting from the effort, why would the Druid be shown physically worn out ?

George Bornstein has defined Fergus's defeat as the search for beauty in a mishapen world which results in the sorrow of perpetual mutability.¹⁰ This explanation supports the idea of quest in the poem, i.e., Fergus's attachment to the world of beauty (senses) and his inability to either break away from that bondage or to relive it in his human existence. The quest therefore ends in failure. The reason for the failure is in the nature of the quester himself. He is unable to ^{break} his bondage to ego or self and hence is unable to achieve the transcendence which he had been questing for through wisdom.

9. "Oriental and Celtic Elements in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats", in D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds., Centenary Essays on the Art of W.B. Yeats (Ibadan, The University Press, 1965), p. 36.

10. Yeats and Shelley (Chicago, The University Press, 1970), p. 56.

The quest for transcendent reality we noticed in "Fergus and the Druid" is taken up in "The Rose of Battle." It is here in the form of a struggle to achieve something eternal and spiritual. W.Y. Tindall has commented on the nature of the battle thus: " 'The Rose of Battle' is more occult, symbolizing God's side in the battle of spirit against matter or what inspires occultists and those who have failed of earthly love in their endless battle with the materialists."¹¹ One thing is clear in the poem that the quest is for something permanent as opposed to the transience of human love.

The poet is concerned with a mental quest as can be observed from the following lines :

The tall thought-woven sails, that flap unfurled
Above the tide of hours, trouble the air,
And God's bell buoyed to be the water's care,¹²

The "thought-woven sails" present a picture of the intended battle through the creative imagination. The battle shall take place amidst time (tide of hours). God's bell is the sorrow at the transient beauty and transient love in the human world. Throughout the whole poem the bell is referred to again and again as the deep seated cry in man which arouses

11. The Permanence of Yeats, p.271

12. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 113-114.

the creative imagination.

The poet gives the quest a dramatic intensity by referring to a band of questers who are dissatisfied with earthly love and its transience. It is these people who are involved in the battle of the Rose:

The sad, the lonely, the insatiable,
To these old Night shall all her mystery tell;
God's bell has claimed then by the little cry
Of their sad hearts, that may not live nor die.¹³

These questers are characterised by their sorrow, their loneliness and their zeal for the object of their quest. The object of their quest is the central beauty symbolized by the Rose ; in other words love, the beauty of which is not transient.

In the last stanza of the poem the nature of the Rose is brought out more clearly. The Rose is eternal. It existed before the battle began and it continues to exist after the questers are defeated in the battle. The Rose is double natured like the holy tree in "The Two Trees." It stands for the eternal beauty quested for and also the beauty of the imperfect world :

Rose of all Roses, Rose of all the world

13. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 114.

You, too, have come where the dim tides are hurled
 Upon the wharves of sorrow, and heard sing
 The bell that calls us on;¹⁴

The questers who are unable to achieve perfect beauty on the earth are like artists who are unable to achieve perfection while they are alive. But in their death they gain complete union with the object of their quest. The "stars" in the following lines reflect the eternal beauty symbolized by the Rose :

And when at last defeated in His wars,
 They have gone down under the same white stars,
 We shall no longer hear the little cry
 Of our sad hearts, that may not live nor die.¹⁵

The failure to achieve perfect beauty on the earth re-echoes a poem from Crossways -- "The Indian to His Love" -- which highlights the inability of love to achieve perfection on the earth.

Bornstein, while trying to analyse its nature has given a cogent reason for the failure of the quest. He says that "the battle is not military but intellectual, between the ideal form of beauty and the flawed world of appearances."¹⁶

14. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 115.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p.57

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" expresses the poet's longing to achieve a spiritual awakening amidst nature's plenty. "This poem, first published in 1890, was written in Bedford Park, the London suburb where the Yeats family lived from 1888 to 1902. Yeats was homesick for Ireland, and hearing in Fleet Street a tinkle of water and seeing a fountain in a shop window, which balanced a little ball upon its jet, he began to remember the sound of lake water in Ireland..."¹⁷

In writing this poem Yeats was also influenced by his readings of Thoreau (1817-62). He wished to live alone on an island (Innisfree, a rocky island in Lough Gill, county Sligo) in pursuit of wisdom in imitation of Thoreau.

Raymond Cowell has discussed the larger and more inclusive imports of this poem: "... it embodied a whole range of emotions — his love for Maud, his nationalism, his homesickness for example — as well as reflecting his interest in new linguistic and rhythmic possibilities..."¹⁸ To add to Cowell's perception of the poem's concern, we can say that Yeats here deals with two contrary worlds, the mundane existence and the natural world. The beauty of the natural

17. A.N. Jeffares, W.B. Yeats: Selected Poems (Essex, Longman York Press, 1986), pp. 15-16.

18. W.B. Yeats (London, Evans Brothers Ltd., 1969), p.20.

world points out to the misery and complexities of the mundane world. This intensifies the longing for quest to transcend the material existence of the mundane world.

The poem opens with a strong resolution to go to
Innisfree :

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay
 and wattles made :
Nine bean rows will I have there,
 a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee loud glade.¹⁹

These lines express a resolve to undertake a journey. The "small cabin" symbolizes the object of quest. It appears to be the central image of the poem, around which other sensuous images are presented to bring home the soothing atmosphere of the proposed shelter from the miseries of the world. As he dreams of the cabin, he also dreams of the materials needed to build it. The materials are "clay and wattles" which are implicitly characterised by simplicity, nobility and beauty. All these references give a superiority to the world of nature over mundane existence which has not been stated in the poem in the interest of economy and precision. The poet

19. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 117.

further talks about having nine bean rows in his garden and a beehive. . . The nine bean rows have a cosmic significance when linked to the nine planets of the solar system. The expansion of this reference gives the quest a larger meaning and represents the quest of man to gain a unity with Godhead.²⁰

The honey-bee indicates sweetness, nourishment, and vitality, besides its auditory seduction because of the buzzing sound. The honey-bees and their lives are on a larger scale symbolic of the universe of which man himself is an infinitesimal part. They also represent the seclusion and loneliness that ancient Indian hermits found in the lap of nature. The buzzing of the bees is not a hindrance to the poet's quest for transcendence because the buzzing instead of being distractive, engenders mental peace and serenity. All these things are seen as the paraphernalia of the small cabin. The beans rows and bees develop the meaning of the small cabin as the central object of the quest. The cabin is representative of a permanent habitation of the soul which has gained spiritual insight and bliss, and has also transcended the painful complexities of reality.

20. The Kabbalistic influence is quite apparent here.
For details see

Gershom G. Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism
(London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1965), p. 108.

The beauty of nature is presented as sublime and has the power to enrich the human soul :

And I shall have some peace there,
 For peace comes dropping slow,
 Dropping from the veils of the morning to where,
 the cricket sings;
 There midnight's all a glimmer, and
 noon a purple glow,
 And evening full of the linnet's wings.²¹

It is probably this stanza which has prompted W.Y. Tindall to comment that the theme of the poem is a union of dying and hope of heaven with an aesthetic parallel.²²

The fact that peace drops slowly refers to the automatic emanation of spiritual endowment and peace from nature. "Morning" suggests the awakening of the soul. The singing of the cricket brings in the rejuvenation of the soul as they are conventionally associated with fertility and being the harbingers of rain. The cumulative nature symbolism which is full of brightness, beauty and energy brings a soothing effect. In unison they establish an ideal state of spiritual existence which is not abstract but full of life. The repetition of the earlier line -- "I will arise and go now" --

21. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 117.

22. The Literary Symbol (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 251.

towards the end of the poem affirms the poet's resolve to go to Innisfree. Richard Ellmann has affirmed the spiritual quest in this poem by commenting on the above line :

The fact that the first line of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree," echoes the New Testament ('I will arise and go unto my father') is symptomatic of the traditional almost religious stateliness of this verse.²³

The autobiographical symbolism in the poems averred to above is also present in "The White Birds" which originated when Yeats and Maud Gonne were resting after a walk on the cliffs of Howth. Two seagulls flew over their heads and Maud Gonne asserted that if she were given the choice to be a bird, she would be a seagull. The quest in the poem is worked out through four symbols, namely, the meteor, the blue star, the rose, and the lily. In the opening stanza the lovers are expressing a longing to be white birds (which symbolize a journey) because they are weary of the meteor and the blue star :

We tire of the flame of the meteor, before
it can fade and flee;
And the flame of the blue star of
twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,

23. The Identity of Yeats (London, Faber & Faber, 1963), p.22.

Has awaked in our hearts, my beloved,
a sadness that may not die.²⁴

The "flame of the meteor" symbolises the transience of physical passion and the "blue star of twilight" represents spiritual love. The fact that these two aspects of love have created weariness and sorrow in the lovers' hearts evokes in them a desire for the perfection of love. The evoking in their hearts of "a sadness that may not die" echoes a familiar line from "The Rose of Battle" :

... by the little cry
Of their sad hearts, that may not live
nor die.²⁵

The anguish in the two poems is similar as it represents a yearning for a quest.

In the next stanza the lover refers to the rose and the lily. For a better understanding of these two symbols we can refer to Yeats's notes on these symbols :

There is recurrence of the symbols of the lily and the rose in "The Shadowy Waters," a later play. In this play the hero appears with a lily embroidered on his breast and the heroine with a rose. This gives the lily and the rose

24. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 122.

25. Ibid., p.114.

definiteness as masculine and feminine symbols. "Yeats has explained in his notes that he conceived of man as ever seeking death and woman as ever seeking life.²⁶

This suggests that man represents intellect and woman represents creativity.

In the second stanza once again the lover asks his beloved to transcend the dream world of the lily and the rose. The lovers together express the longing to be changed into white birds :

A weariness comes from those dreamers,
 dew dabbled, the lily and the rose,
 Ah, dream not of them, my beloved,
 the flame of the meteor that goes,
 Or the flame of the blue star that lingers
 hung low in the fall of the dew :
 For I would we were changed to white
 birds on the wandering foam: I and you!²⁷

The lily and the rose in this stanza represent imperfect beauty. The lily stands for the intellect and the rose for creative imagination. This beauty is like the love represented by the meteor and the blue star. For the lovers, beauty and love

26. Quoted in Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (Faber and Faber, London, 1963), p. 70.

27. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 122.

the form of a dream is unsatisfactory, is refuted by the last stanza in which the lovers are hopeful of obtaining perfection in the fairy isles. George Bornstein has rightly felt that the quest in the poem is for eternal beauty.³⁰

In "The Two Trees" the quest is of a spiritual nature. Norman Jeffares has stated that :

"The Two Trees" is, however, more esoteric than any of the Rose poems; it marks the beginning of Yeats's increasingly dramatic use of the opposites of subjectivity and objectivity; it draws upon the Kabbalistic tradition, and its trees bear an obvious relationship to the Tree of Knowledge of Biblical tradition...³¹

The poem is about two trees which are opposite to each other in nature and quality. The first tree is a source of joy and the second tree is a source of sorrow. The entire poem is a plea of the lover to the beloved to realize the spirituality hidden within her heart in the form of the holy tree or the tree of joy.

Richard Ellmann has supported the idea of the quest for

30. Yeats and Shelley, p. 56.

31. The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, Studies in English Literature, No. 4 ed. David Daiches (London, Edward Arnold, 1961), pp. 14-15.

the renewal of the benign aspect of the tree. He has said that the poem is concerned with the Sephirotic Tree of life which has two aspects, benign and malign. He feels that it represents also the double nature of man and universe together which can be developed for good or evil.³²

The poem opens with an invocation to the Beloved to gaze into her heart :

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;³³

The holy tree which is growing in her heart is representative of a spiritual principle. The beloved herself represents the human soul. The beloved's heart is also a source of joy and fruitfulness :

From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colours of its fruit
Have dowered the stars with merry light;
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night;³⁴

The beloved's heart is the repository of the spiritual

32. The Identity of W.B. Yeats (London, Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 76.

33. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 134.

34. Ibid.

principle from which all joys spring and of which the different branches of different religions of the world partake. The invocation, "Beloved, gaze in thine own heart," reminds us of a similar invocation in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (Crossways) — "there is no truth saving in thine own heart." This affirms the quest for an inner truth within the human soul.

The association of the spiritual quest with images from nature (flowers and fruits) reveals the impact of Indian hermits (who wandered in forests in search of transcendence) on Yeats. The images from nature also make the holy tree a source of joy, life and vitality for the whole universe. The fruit hanging on the branches suggests the universal achievement of all religions to bring light to the darkness of the world. In the same way the beloved's gazing into her hearts brings peace and placidity into the dark night.

The holy tree is not only a source of joy, life and vitality, it is also a source of harmony in the universe :

The shaking of its leafy head
Has given the waves their melody,³⁵

The following lines refer to the spiritual quest which has

35. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 134.

been taken up through many lives :

There the Loves a circle go,
 The flaming circle of our days,
 Gyring, spiring to and fro
 In those great ignorant leafy ways;
 Remembering all that shaken hair
 And how the winged sandals dart,³⁶

The "flaming circle of our days" shows Yeats's intention to make us aware that human life is already endowed with spirituality and divine light, but it has to be re-discovered within the self. The "flaming circle" also refers to the circular movement of life from birth to decadence, and then to renewal and rebirth. The "gyring and spiring" reaffirms the movement or quest for self-realization. The tree so far has been presented as a source of harmony and vitality for the universe and the beloved gazing on it is filled with love : "Thine eyes grow full of tender care."

In the second stanza the beloved is confronted with the decadence of the holy tree. Its decadence also represents the turmoil in Ireland. In the opening lines we are presented with a distorted reflection of the holy tree in the bitter glass that the demons hold :

36. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 135.

Gaze no more in the bitter glass
 The demons, with their subtle guile,
 Lift up before us when they pass,
 Or only gaze a little while;
 For there a fatal image grows³⁷

The reflection of the tree suggests the unreality of the second tree. The demons are representative of decadence and evil. The plea of the lover to the beloved to refrain from looking at the bitter glass, gives hope to the spiritual quest of the beloved who should attempt to revive the holy tree which is going through a stage of decadence.

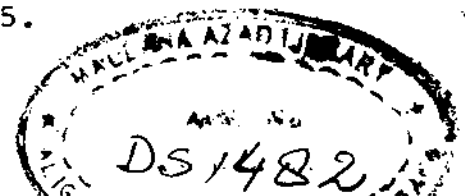
The following lines present an evil image of the holy tree in which goodness is inherent :

For there a fatal image grows
 That the stormy night receives,
 Roots half hidden under snows,
 Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
 For all things turn to barrenness
 In the dim glass, the demons hold,³⁸

We notice that the tree, which was holy, life giving, with its branches bearing flowers and fruit, has now been perceived in an image of death, decay and destruction. The broken boughs and blackened leaves strengthen the destructiveness inherent

37. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 135.

38. Ibid.



in the phrase "fatal image." In contrast with the lines in the earlier stanza,

The surety of its hidden roots
Has planted quiet in the night ³⁹

the roots are no longer so full of strength and they are covered with snow. The silence here is a deadly frozen silence as compared with the peace and quiet of the night in the earlier stanza. Also while the movement of the leaves of the holy tree supplied music, harmony and life, here the image creates a storm. The storm brings only barrenness and violence.

We find that the winged loves associated with other lives and their implication of a fruitful quest have been changed to obstruction in the quest as it is clear from the following lines :

There, through the broken branches, go
The ravens of unresting thought;
Flying, crying, to and fro,
Cruel claw and hungry throat.⁴⁰

"The ravens of unresting thought" and their dishevelled movement suggest doubt, disunity and confusion as contrasted with

39. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 134.

40. Ibid., p. 136.

the hope, belief and unity created by the winged loves and the flaming circle of the earlier stanza. The beloved's eyes which were full of love and joy when she gazed on the holy tree have now become full of misery and disunity, which is indicated by the distorted image of the tree. The decadence of the holy tree may represent the decadence and upheaval in Ireland. The holy tree itself represents Irish culture which Yeats said (in a letter to Olivia Shakespeare) he was interested in restructuring. In the same letter he also mentioned about the composition of this poem : "...I am delighted at your liking 'The Two Trees'... I am always ransacking Ireland for people writing at Irish things..."⁴¹

Some critics have felt that the beloved in the poem is Maud Gonne. D.T. Torchiana has said this poem is on Maud Gonne.⁴² Torchiana, in fact, echoes Peter Ure's stance in this regard : "In this case the idea is that a beautiful woman should not despoil the subjectivity of her nature by the politics of objectivity, or sacrifice the unity of being to a cause outside itself..."⁴³

The beloved may be Maud Gonne herself but through her

41. The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London, Rupert Hart Davis, 1954), p. 256.

42. "Among School Children: the Irish Spirit," A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds., In Excited Reverie, (London, Macmillan, 1965), p. 126.

43. Yeats (London, Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 36.

Yeats has worked out the quest towards the renewal of the sephirotic tree and Irish culture. Most of the poems of this collection deal with the quest in the form of a dream or an escape from reality. Yeats has utilized the occult influences here but he has not really succeeded in making a good use of Irish folk-lore. Yeats seems to be sifting the material he needs to help him work towards Irish cultural unity. It is only in the next collection of poems that he is able to work convincingly towards Irish cultural unity. In this collection of poems Yeats has made a good use of natural images.

To sum up we would find that the issues found in these poems range from the personal or biographical level to the national level. There is a quest in these poems for spirituality, and transcendence over mundane reality. Nature assists the spiritual quest in these poems because it represents a spiritual level of existence rather than just physical elements of nature.

CHAPTER IV

THE WINDS AMONG THE REEDS

Jeffares has said that The Wind Among the Reeds carried Yeats's thesis of romantic devotion and poetry of essences, of beauty and implicit mysteries to a high watermark.¹ A.S. Collins holds a similar view in his statement that among his early works, The Wind Among the Reeds is Yeats's "last and best volume..."² Majority of the poems in this collection deal with some kind of quest or yearning either directly or symbolically. B. Rajan has the following remarks to make on the poems in the collection under consideration :

Several influences contribute to its characteristic quality, unrequited love in Yeats's personal life, the influence of symbolism on his literary mind, his deepening interest in esoteric wisdom, and his consequent conviction that the "invisible gates" were about to open, that a "crowning crisis of the world" was imminent which would renew belief in a super sensual reality. The result is a poetry of twilight, solemn, ceremonious and remote, and yet at the same time intensely and evocatively personal, a poetry

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1. "The Poetry of W.B. Yeats" in David Daiches ed., Studies in English Literature (London, Edward Arnold, 1961), p. 19.
 2. English Literature of the Twentieth Century (London, University Tutorial Press Ltd., 1962), p. 17.

which represents the farthest advance
of Yeats's movement in the direction of
the dream.³

This is not to say that all the poems have easily identifiable recurrent thematic and structural patterns. In fact in each poem the nature of the quest and the degree of its attainability vary.

Yeats has made a good use of the rich treasure of Irish mythology for the mode of expressing the quest thereby achieving a two-fold purpose, i.e. the creation of poetry, unique in itself and a working towards Irish cultural unity.

As to the contents of his poems William York Tindall has said that "since embodiment was his aesthetic principle, some of his poems faithfully embody dream... in The Wind Among the Reeds.⁴ W.Y. Tindall has highlighted yet another aspect related to the nature of the quest in The Wind Among the Reeds, namely, that of the dream world. Most of the poems contain the quest towards the world of dream or of Art. E. Wilson has commented on the dream world in The Wind Among the Reeds: "In The Wind Among the Reeds... we still find 'the flaming lute thronged angelic door' and 'the heaven's embroidered

3. W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction
(London, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 35.

4. The Literary Symbol (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 170.

cloths — enwrought with golden and silver light'..."⁵

Ellmann has discovered in The Wind Among the Reeds a quest towards artistic perfection and precision. "In his attempt to guard against producing what was merely intimate and transitory, Yeats fell into a more remote art than he intended, to which he applied the label of 'still life'."⁶

Yeats's life at the time of the composition of this collection of poems (1899) was characterised by his involvement with dramatic writings (the play "The Shadowy Waters" was published at this time) and a serious commitment to art. There were other influences, too, which shaped his imagination at this juncture of his poetic career. "Yeats's own poetry became more refined and more complex. He learnt elaboration from Wilde and Pater. His technique benefitted by discussions with poets of the nineties, the craftsmen who were members of the Rhymer's Club, in the founding of which Yeats played a major role in 1891."⁷ During this period of his life he made frequent visits to the house of William Morris who was reviving the dead art of tapestry making. The Wind Among the

5. James Hall and Martin Steinmann, eds., The Permanence of Yeats: Selected Criticism (New York, Macmillan, 1950), p. 17.

6. The Identity of Yeats (London, Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 124.

7. A. Norman Jeffares, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, p. 16.

Reeds shows Morris's influence in the intricacy and control over medium which Yeats had learnt from him. In fact "the example of the weaver's art probably helped Yeats, as the musical analogy of 'Four Quartets, helped Eliot, to specialize and intensify his means and attitudes in the same way that he had localized his setting and subject matter."⁸

Perhaps Yeats's purpose in this collection of poems can best be summed up in his own words. Before he began composing The Wind Among the Reeds he had felt "that there was something in myself compelling me to attempt the creation of an art as separate from everything heterogeneous and casual, from all character and circumstance as some Herodiade of our theatre, dancing seemingly alone in her narrow moving luminous circle."⁹ This reveals Yeats's attempt to create art which would be unique in subject matter; probably the narrow luminous circle stands for the purpose which Yeats imposed on his art. The purpose was the commitment to Irish cultural unity. It also placed restrictions on his art. Yeats felt that the objective of Irish cultural unity would mould his poetry into a unique form of expression.

All the poems that have been taken up for analysis from

8. Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 21.

9. W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies (London, Macmillan, 1956), p. 321.

this collection deal with the quest for the dream world or the world of art and imagination. We will observe in the following poems that the world of dream has been concretised as the Rose, Irish natural heritage, fairy folk-lore of Ireland, or has given birth to his preoccupation with polarities.

In "The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart" we find the quest or pursuit to restore the beauty of the dream world. The lover is concerned with the intrusion of reality into his heart. Its's over-emphasis is destroying or harming the image of the rose present in his heart. The opening lines describe the bleak reality of everyday existence which is disturbing the lover :

All things uncomely and broken, all things
worn out and old,
The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak
of a lumbering cart,
The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing
the wintry mould,
Are wronging your image that blossoms
a rose in the deeps of my heart.¹⁰

The wearing out and ugliness of things that have grown old bring about a discontentment expressed by the crying of the

10. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 142-143.

child. "The creaking of the lumbering cart" further emphasises this discontentment. It is still more intensified by "the heavy steps of the ploughman" who is trying to break the wintry mould. In other words he is trying to bring an awakening from the death and listlessness imminent in the wrong that is being done to the image of the rose.

The decay and wearing out as seen in the above lines are part of the natural order of existence and there is nothing disturbing in it. The lover however is concerned about the way this reality has intruded upon the heart of man. Harold Bloom is of the view that the lover is here rejecting reality.¹¹ This is not true, because the lover is only trying to repair the damage caused by the intrusion of reality.

The following lines tell us of the damage done to the image of the rose in the lover's heart and his attempt to restore its image :

The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong
too great to be told;
I hunger to build them anew and sit
on a green knoll apart,
With the earth and the sky and the water,
remade like a casket of gold

11. Yeats (London, The Oxford University Press, 1972),
p. 125.

For my dreams of your image that blossoms
a rose in the deeps of my heart.¹²

The lover feels that the damage done to the rose is too great to be described. "The unshapely things" refer to the disharmony created by reality in the heart of man. The lover has a passionate desire to reconstruct the image of the rose and restore it to its pristine romantic freshness, suggested by "the green knoll apart." The fervent effort is to create harmony between man and his natural surroundings. The rose represents a unity not only between man and the universe, but between his emotions and intellect as well.

This quest towards reawakening and unity is further strengthened by the lover's yearning to unite the earth, sky and water into a golden casket. The four elements according to the Rosicrucians (as also in Indian philosophy) were earth, water, air and fire. We also know that in Yeats's occult studies (while a member of the Theosophical Society) each element stood for a distinct stage and emotion of human life. This reasserts the quest towards a unity between the elements of the physical world and towards a reawakening of the unity within man's self.

This poem also shows the influence of the Paterian

12. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 143.

aesthetic (art for art's sake). We arrive at this conclusion because the lover hungers to remould the earth, sky and water "into a casket of gold." Can this casket of gold not be akin to the fourth element "fire"? "Fire" for Yeats symbolized passion and emotion that came of devoting oneself to Art. The casket, when related to the rose, stands for artistic unity. The lover can also be understood to be an artist greatly oppressed by reality and unable to stop its intervention into his dream world except by transforming it through artistic means. The lover's quest implies neither a rejection of reality nor the complete acceptance of it; he proposes to assimilate it.

In "Into the Twilight" the quest is to restore unity and peace in Ireland through the medium of nature. But nature means much more than it meant in the earlier collection of poems. Nature in this poem represents the rich natural heritage of Ireland which is also the repository of Irish folk-lore culture.

The word "Twilight" is derived from Yeats's own work, The Celtic Twilight. The following lines taken from The Celtic Twilight illustrate clearly that the title of this poem suggests a quest through the medium of the natural heritage of Ireland :

... The good people live out their passionate lives not far off, as I think as we shall be among them when we die if we but keep our natures simple and passionate (like peasants). May it not even be that death shall unite us to all romance...¹³

The opening stanza of the poem identifies the quester and the quest :

Out-worn heart, in a time out-worn
Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;
Laugh, heart, again in the gray twilight,
Sigh heart, again in the dew of the morn.¹⁴

The heart is being exhorted to resume the quest which had once been taken up and has now been abandoned. The heart is worn out by the turmoil in the mundane existence of Irish people. The reference is to the turmoil ridden period in which Ireland was caught. The "nets of wrong and right" stand for the civilized, mundane existence which the heart is being exhorted to leave in favour of the peaceful world of nature. The laughing of the heart and the sighing of the heart at twilight and morning respectively, suggest a beautiful and fresh world of nature and also the emotional freedom that living amidst nature encourages.

13. The Celtic Twilight (London, Bullen, 1902), p. 108.

14. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 147.

In the next stanza the beauty of Ireland and its rich natural heritage is shown to transcend the despair and disunity in Ireland brought about by slanderous tongues :

Your mother Eire is always young,
 Dew ever shining and twilight grey;¹⁵
 Though hope fall from you and love decay,
 Burning in fires of a slanderous tongues.

"Mother Eire" represents an eternally young and eternally beautiful world of nature and Irish folk lore. It also suggests that the natural heritage of Ireland can enrich the quest. Whether the quester imbibes something from "Mother Eire" is not the crucial question here. What is more important is that "Mother Eire" is an eternal inspiration to the Irish people.

In the third stanza nature is shown to possess a brotherhood and a unity. The heart is being exhorted to partake of these qualities of nature :

Come, heart, where hill is heaped upon hill :
 For there the mystical brotherhood
 Of sun and moon and hollow and wood
 And river and stream work out their will;¹⁶

15. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 148.

16. Ibid.

The heart is being asked to merge itself with the unity and mystical quest of nature. In this way these qualities of nature can be emulated by the Irish people.

In the last stanza the beauty and unity of nature is heightened by the presence of "God," "winding His lonely horn" :

And God stands winding His lonely horn,
And time and the world are ever in flight;
And love is less kind than the grey twilight,
And hope is less dear than the dew of morn ¹⁷

The presence of "God" amidst nature gives the natural world a permanence over the temporal human world of flux. This emphasizes Irish natural heritage as a source of eternal inspiration for peace, unity and harmony to the Irish people.

The horn of God also represents the gyres or the cycles of time in which Yeats believed. The gyres suggest renewal and rebirth in the decadent world of Ireland and therefore make the quest a hopeful one.

In "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" there is a quest for the immortality of love in the context of life caught in the flux of time. The quest is symbolically

17. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 148.

presented through Aengus's (God of love) quest for his diemonic beloved.

This poem is in the narrative form with a well-defined beginning, middle and end. The fact that the narrative has been presented by the quester himself in the first person helps in bringing out with the effect of immediacy, the passion and intensity with which the quest is suffused.

The first stanza of the poem tells us something of the beginning of the quest :

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And white moths were on the wing,
And moth like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.¹⁸

We are presented with the picture of the supernatural world that Aengus is leaving. The "fire" symbolizes the intensity of passion for the object of quest. The quest and the object of quest are clearly understood when Aengus cuts and peels a hazel wand and hooks a berry to a thread. The hazel

18. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 149.

wood in Irish mythology is associated with magical wisdom. The action of the quester can be defined thus : that with the help of magical powers Aengus drops (a berry) his desire for love into the flux of time (as symbolized by the stream) and attracts a supernatural being in the form of a fish. The "white moths on the wing" refers to the universal significance of lovers' pursuit highlighting Aengus's quest for love. "The moth-like stars" are beacons of light heralding the beginning of a journey.

In the second stanza the change from the supernatural scenery to the domestic scene suggests Aengus's departure from the timeless world into the world of flux :

When I had laid it on the floor
 I went to blow the fire aflame,
 But something rustled on the door,
 And someone called me by name:
 It had become a glimmering girl
 With apple blossom in her hair
 Who called me by my name and ran
 And faded through the brightening air.¹⁹

We find that the celestial light of the stars and moths in the earlier stanza has been substituted by the fire in the grate, which is truly a poor substitute for the celestial

19. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 149-150.

light. The poet is indirectly suggesting the difficulty and impossibility of a quest for immortal love in the temporal world. This is further confirmed by the fact that the fish changes into a glimmering girl and disappears. The trout itself suggests ideal love in unnatural surroundings. This ideal love, before it can be merged into earthly and physical passion (the fire in the grate), eludes the quester.

As far as mythology is concerned we find that the story itself has been drawn from it, but it is mixed with fairy tale conventions, like mysterious disappearance of tangible objects. Further the word "glimmering" besides making the girl a source of light, endows her with supernatural attributes, through its suggestiveness of ethereal translucence. The apple-blossoms are appertinances of nature and suggest youth, vigour, freshness, tenderness, beauty and pleasant sensations of vision and touch. The apple blossoms in a subtle manner communicate the nature of the quest which is also for sensuous rather than exclusively spiritual love. The disappearance of the girl is also a pointer to the fact that the quest has to go on.

In the final stanza we are shown that Aengus has grown old in the quest for his diamonic beloved :

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,

I will find out where she has gone,
 And kiss her lips and take her hands;
 And walk among long dappled grass,
 And pluck till time and times are done
 The silver apples of the moon,
 The golden apples of the sun.²⁰

The hopelessness of the love of the old for the youth is an archetypal theme. Such stories were present in abundance in Irish mythology. Yeats subtly regrets the loss of the pleasures of youth in old age even in his later poem, "Sailing to Byzantium." His decision not to give in, signifies a continuation of the quest.

The lover's resolve to find his beloved out and "kiss her lips and take her hands" tells us that the quest is for sensuous love rather than an ideological one. "The silver apples of the moon" and "the golden apples of the sun" both lend width and breadth to the quest to the extent that it assumes cosmic dimensions. The change from the past through the present to the future also lends an aura of immortality to the object of quest and the continuity of the quester's journey.

Though the quest has not been concluded, it has not been abandoned either. So there is no despair. In fact,

20. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 150.

the presence of sensuous images suggests that the quester has achieved the quest in a vicarious manner.

On the biographical level the poem may be a kind of artistic compensation for Yeats's frustrated love for Maud Gonne. In fact, Yeats could never overcome the frustration resulting from the failure of his passionate attraction to Maud Gonne. The silver trout may then be viewed as the artistic inspiration that Maud Gonne provided for Yeats. We find that it is the fish that introduces us to a domestic setting, a warm, safe and secluded existence. It is the disappearance of the fish which starts the quest in the true sense. The image of the trout changing into a beautiful girl with apple blossom in her hair is very close to Yeats's own description of Maud Gonne in his Autobiographies.²¹

Harold Bloom has rightly argued that the quest for love is central to this poem — "Aengus is Yeats's God of lovers, in the sense that every man can say : 'whenever I am in love it is not that I am in love but Aengus who is always looking for Edaine through somebody's eyes.'"²² The folklorish association of personal eroticism and amorous quest raises the poem to a higher level of implication than what was suggested

21. Autobiographies (London, Macmillan, 1956), p. 123.

22. Yeats (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 124.

in the sensuous images averred to above.

In "He Mourns for the Change that has Come upon Him and his Beloved and Longs for the End of the World" we find once again a quest for an immaterial world. The elaborateness of the title is a precise statement of the poem's thematic concern. Yeats's notes to this poem provide the direction to approach it. He has said "that the pursuit of the hound for the deer indicates the desire of the man for the woman and the desire of the woman for the desire of the man."²³ We can note here the subtle differences between the man who desires the woman and the woman who "merely desires his desire." This suggests the woman or the deer in this poem symbolizes a non-physical and immaterial object. The poem opens with the call of the hound to the deer:

Do you not hear me calling, white
 deer with no horns ?
 I have been changed to a hound
 with one red ear;
 I have been in the Path of the Stones and
 the Wood of Thorns,
 For somebody hid hatred and hope
 and desire and fear

23. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 806-807.

Under my feet that they follow you
night and day.²⁴

The hound in narrating the obstacles in the quest of the deer reveals his own nature. Hatred, hope, desire and fear constitute the world of reality of which the hound is a victim. The deer who is the object of his quest symbolizes the immaterial world of love and beauty. The hound in the reality-ridden world is seeking refuge in love.

The hound's quest for love and beauty is further strengthened by the mention of Aengus, the master of love in the next few lines :

A man with a hazel wand come
without sound;
He changed me suddenly; I was
looking another way;
And now my calling is but the calling
of a hound;²⁵

The "man with a hazel wand" is Aengus, the God of beauty, youth and poetry. The hazel wand is associated with the hazel tree which was in Irish mythology, the tree of knowledge. It follows therefore that the hound is under the spell of Aengus and a quester after love and the beauty of esoteric

24. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 153.

25. Ibid.

The quest in this poem remains unconcluded and hence continuing because it transcends time. The lover merely longs for an end of the world which might change his form, but his quest will continue as the boar rises and goes back to rest again.

On the biographical level this poem may be the poet's own quest towards an artistic resolution of his rejected love for Maud Gonne. This poem also anticipates Yeats's poetry written in his old age in which he yearns to capture those moments of love with Maud Gonne which he really never got. The recapitulation of youth and love in old age is aptly represented by Aengus. "Yeats drew attention to the kinship between the hounds of his desire and the hounds that flicker through the ancient legends of the world and themselves are related to the voice of the night wind and to the hounds that hunt the souls of the dead in primitive belief."²⁷ This explanation supports the quest on the biographical level and confirms that this poem was written in a mood of disappointment in his love for Maud Gonne. His sorrow was at the thought of the immortality of the soul which would take on new forms moving from birth to birth, from change to change continuing the quest for the soul and body of his beloved.

27. A.G. Stock, W.B. Yeats : His Poetry and Thought (London, Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 49.

Paradoxically, the very object of quest — permanence — becomes the cause of continuing disappointment.

In "The Cap and Bells" we find a more complex and symbolic development of the polarities mentioned in the earlier poems. This poem conforms to all the earlier poems in which there is a quest through dreaming or quest in a dream. This is so because the present poem is the narration of an actual dream of the poet.

The jester is the quester in the poem. Apparently, the poem presents the simple story of a jester wooing a queen and being accepted by her after a few rejections. But a close reading of the poem reveals the characteristic Yeatsian feature of hiding profundity under superficial simplicity.

The opening stanza shows the background in which the jester is walking and his sending his soul to the queen :

The jester walked in the garden :
The garden had fallen still;
He bade his soul rise upward
And stand on her window sill.²⁸

The following lines reveal the nature of the soul and the nature of its journey :

28. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 159.

It rose in a straight blue garment,
 When owls began to call ;
 It had grown wise-tougued by thinking
 Of a quiet and light footfall;²⁹

The "blue garment" suggests the intellectual activity of the soul. The calling of owls heightens the ominousness present in the environment.

The next stanza tells us of the failure of the journey made by the soul :

But the young queen would not listen;
 She rose in her pale night gown;
 She drew in the heavy casement
 And pushed the latches down.³⁰

It is here that the queen is introduced to us for the first time. She refuses to listen to the wisdom of the soul. It is here that two antithetical selves are presented before us. The queen represents the feeling self and the jester through the soul represents the thinking self. But neither the jester nor the queen are complete selves on their own. Had this confrontation been the objective of the jester's quest, the poem would have ended here. The real objective of the quest is to complete the personality of the queen. Her drawn

29. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 159.

30. Ibid.

casements and her desire not to be disturbed show her separation and remoteness from the jester as well as the failure of the soul's journey.

In the next stanza we find a change of tactics on the part of the jester who sends his heart in place of the soul :

He bade his heart go to her,
When the owls called out no more;
In a red and quivering garment
It sang to her through the door.³¹

The heart "in a red and quivering garment" (as opposed to the intellectualizing of the soul) represents feeling, fullness, energy, warmth, emotion and vibrancy. The red garment may even suggest the first streaks of dawn. The quest here can be seen as a movement in time from the stillness of evening (when the jester is walking in the garden) to night when the queen is seen in a pale night gown and then to the first streak of dawn when the owls are quiet (when the heart is rising). But we find that the heart, too, is rejected by the queen. So far we find that the jester has somehow been underplayed by the repulses of the queen.

In the next stanza Yeats makes the jester speak for the first time in the first person with dramatic intensity :

31. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, pp. 159-60.

'I have cap and bells,' he pondered,
 'I will send them to her and die;'³²

The death of the jester symbolizes the merging of the quester with the object of quest, establishing the immortality of the quest and achieving of the unity of Being.

The last two stanzas have a repetitive pattern. The queen places the cap and bells on her bosom and sings them a love song. The heart and soul come to her through the door and window into her right and left hands respectively. The right and left hands are very important to the development of the quest in the poem. The right and left hands symbolize north and south, frigidity and fullness. This is to capture in a sentence the development of the quest from frigidity and barrenness, in the beginning, to fullness and emotional warmth in the end. This fecundity and fullness of the quest is also predicted by the "noise like crickets" set up by the heart and soul.

The two most important images of the poem, the cap and bells, represent a resolution or binding together of all the visual and auditory images in the poem. They together represent the wholeness or the success of the quest of which the heart and soul are only a small part.

32. The Poems of W.B. Yeats, p. 160.

The "cap" brings within it all the development associated with the changing of garments from straight blue to quivering red. The "bells" gather in themselves the gradual development of the quest from the calling of owls, to the singing heart, the singing queen, and finally to the healthy and happy sounds of crickets.

Harold Bloom has detected a sense of irony in this poem, which means the strange relationship of the jester and the queen, which is only symbolically resolved: "Whether the poem is essentially dream or not, it has a larger and more sinister meaning, in its essential and intrinsic idea of the relation between jester and the queen, or poet and Muse, Yeats and Maud Gonne."³³ In a way all these three ideas seem to be imbedded in the poem. The relationship between the jester and the queen was conventionally one in which the jester entertained the queen. In this poem the jester is not only entertaining the queen but is in quest of a deeper relationship with her. His death enriches the personality of the queen.

The jester could also represent the poet's artistic impulses and the queen his muse. Here the quest could be understood to be the artist's struggle to embody the perfection

33. Yeats (London, Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 128.

of the Muse in his soul. As for the Yeats — Maud
Gonne relationship this poem could well represent his pursuit
of Maud Gonne and the many rejections and his final attempt
to resolve this rejection in symbolic or artistic terms.

David Daiches has identified yet another theme in the
poem, namely, the temporal versus the changeless :³⁴ the
quester symbolizes the temporal and the quest symbolizes the
changeless. This is so because at the end of the poem the
quester is merged with the quest; the jester dies, but the
quest is immortalised, as if he were an alter ego of the
queen.

J.H. Natterstad holds the view that the cap and bells
together represent the integrity of Art. The queen stands
for beauty, and Art reconciles the opposites and merges with
the beautiful. This is a rendering of Yeats's own aesthetic
position that beauty is a product of the integrative function
of art.³⁵

Thus we find that the poems of The Wind Among the Reeds
collectively deal with the ideas that have been considered
separately in the earlier collections. There is a merging

34. "The Earlier of Poems : Some Themes and Patterns,"
in A. Norman Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds.,
In Excited Reverie (London, Macmillan Press, 1965), p.50.
35. "Yeats, The Cap and Bells," in J. Edwin Whitesell ed.,
The Explicator, 1967, vol. 25

together of the quest for the immaterial world, quest for Irish national unity and quest for a refuge in the natural world. It is also worth mentioning that while Crossways dealt largely with quests, spiritual in nature, in this collection the quests are both spiritual and sensuous.

CHAPTER V

C O N C L U S I O N

If we consider the idea of the quest as a whole, in all the three collections of the poems, we will find that there is a perceptive growth and development of it. The development can be traced in the development of the natural imagery and the corresponding growth of the quest which is closely associated with the natural background. Let us recapitulate the significant points in this regard, which emerge from our discussion of the poems in the foregoing sections..

In Crossways we find that the poems have a rich natural background. In the two shepherd poems the quest is towards a subjective truth through the medium of nature. Likewise the next poem, "The Indian Upon God" uses living nature as a means to understand the nature of God. The next two poems deal with a quest for the perfection of love. In "The Indian to His Love" and in "Ephemera" the decay in the natural background reflects the dying out of the physical passion and earthly love. The decay in nature also leads them to realize the immortality of their souls and the immortality of their quest for perfection.

In the next collection of poems, The Rose the soul and the quest for its transcendence has been given greater

emphasis. Nature also gains a spiritual quality as it becomes the means of transcendence for the soul. The quest which in the earlier collection was largely personal has now widened to include the biographical and political overtones. We can see a spiritual quest for transcendence through nature in "The Rose of Battle," "Fergus and the Druid," and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The next two poems, "The White Birds" and "The Two Trees," though containing political and biographical overtones, demonstrate the same pattern. In "The White Birds" the quest for the perfection of love and beauty is partly concluded in the wish to take refuge in the fairy isles of the Irish folk lore. This shows Yeats's awakening to Irish cultural unity and reconstruction, which was to become his major creative preoccupation later. In "The Two Trees" also Yeats presents the cause of Irish national unity, for the holy tree here represents peace, unity and harmony in Ireland. The poem can also be said to represent a biographical quest, for the "Beloved" here implies Maud Gonne.

In the third and last (among his early poems) collection, we come across a greater perfection of technique and maturity of ideas. Nature has developed a complex and deeper meaning as can be seen from the symbols of the Rose, Twilight, the boar, the deer and the hound. The quest is

biographical as well as symbolical.

Even if these poems are bound together by a more complicated quest towards a world of aesthetic beauty and harmony, the echoes of the cherished dream world of the shepherds and the lovers longing for perfection can still be found here.

In "The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart" there is the quest to restore the image of the Rose which stands for the creative and artistic impulses of mankind. "Into the Twilight" has a smaller dimension of the quest than the one in the earlier poem. While the earlier poem was concerned with humanity at large, the second poem aims at arousing an awareness in the Irish people to their rich cultural heritage. In "The Song of the Wandering Aengus" and "He Mourns for the Change... World" we find that the quest towards the immortality and perfection of love (which was also present in the earlier collections) has been perfected in its imagery, and its perspective has been widened by the borrowings from Irish mythology, such as the shape-changing of fairies. In "The Cap and Bells" the quest attains to philosophic dimensions, with the help of evocative natural imagery, to reconcile polarities, although the poem is apparently only the narration of a dream.

Thus the selected poems from Yeats's early poetic

career, which we have discussed in the present study, adequately establish that Yeats, even during this phase was not a mere dreamer and escapist, but an artist with concern for profound themes.

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